Written Testimony of Ms. Marléna Sessions CEO, Workforce Development Council of Seattle-King County Before the Subcommittee on Labor, Health and Human Services, Education and Related Agencies United States Senate January 21, 2010

## Chairman and Honorable Members of the Committee:

Thank you for inviting me to participate in today's hearing. My name is Marléna Sessions and I am the CEO of the Workforce Development Council of Seattle-King County, as well as a member of the board of trustees of the U.S. Conference of Mayors Workforce Development Council. I am honored and grateful for this opportunity to talk with you about one of our time's most vital issues: creating and saving jobs.

I would like to begin with the story of a young man in our stimulus-funded jobs for youth program in Seattle last summer. Ryan, age 24, had not made good choices in the past. He was on work release from prison and searching for a job. He had submitted his résumé to about 200 different fast-food places, because he had few job skills. Once employers found out about his conviction, he was out of the running.

Fortunately for Ryan, someone told him about the summer jobs program. He jumped at this opportunity to join our SoDo Inc. program. In this partnership between a youth-services provider and a community college, about 90 young people explored the industrial trades. They spent three weeks on campus in classes, followed by three weeks in a paid internship with a private company.

Ryan's internship was at a maritime supply company called Washington Chain. His wages were paid by the summer program. The company certainly did not intend to hire any new employees—but, at the end of the summer, having seen Ryan's work ethic and willingness to learn, they found a place for him as a permanent employee—in a union job with a future. For the first time, he can support himself and his young children.

When we went to Washington Chain to interview Ryan, he was about 50 feet up in the air, running a crane that moves gigantic mounds of metal chain destined for Navy vessels. We have a wonderful picture of him standing amongst these huge piles of chain. When I see it, I think of the chains that would have been around his future if not for this opportunity to work and to learn valuable skills. As Ryan said, "I was just waiting for a door to open."

Doors opening: To me, that is what education and job training is all about. When people have the skills that employers need, doors open—and jobs are created.

It is critically important for our economy and our well-being as a country that we continue to invest in skill training, in K-12 education that is the foundation of further education and training, and in targeted subsidies that encourage employers to open their doors to new hires.

And while it isn't directly an issue for workforce boards, I feel it's important to point out that we need to make sure that class sizes don't balloon, that students are able to attend college, and that critical programs that help prepare our students for college and careers don't disappear. The last disbursement of state fiscal stabilization funds significantly helped keep teachers in their jobs and keep programs running, but state and local deficits have continued to worsen since then. Federal support for education and teachers as states work to balance their budgets is essential, and I would encourage that a jobs package offer some support in this direction.

But what I would like to emphasize today is that our public workforce investment system has the infrastructure and connections to take investments in job training and use them to put paychecks—rather than unemployment checks—into the hands of Americans.

The stimulus-funding summer jobs program of 2009 is an example of an innovative way to create jobs and of the role of the workforce investment boards in making it happen. More than 300,000 temporary jobs were

created for young people across the country with \$1.2 billion of Recovery Act funds. Our nation's workforce investment boards put this funding into motion immediately and effectively.

In Seattle-King County, our program provided jobs for 900 young people. All were low-income; two-thirds were youth of color and more than half were African-American. Almost 70 percent were deficient in basic math and reading skills. About 16 percent had a disability.

As they did around the country, employers in Seattle-King County stepped up to offer jobs. More than 260 local employers, including private, public and nonprofits, participated. The results were tremendous in terms of skills learned, money earned, and inspiration to continue learning. Young people learned to weld, to drive forklifts, to provide customer service, to design a public-health campaign, to write a resume, to be on time—and they learned that there is a much bigger world of employment out there than they knew.

Across the country, and not just in the summer of 2009, youth work experience has been shown to increase academic success, civic responsibility, and work readiness. And yet, youth employment was at a 60-year low even before the recession, which has further decimated their opportunities in the job market.

Subsidized work is a solution that works. In Seattle, through the summer jobs program, about a third of older, out-of-school youth like Ryan transitioned directly to permanent jobs. Summer jobs do turn into real jobs when employers work directly with young people, teaching and guiding them in a context that extends and expands on what is taught in the classroom. By committing to federal investments in summer jobs, like the bill recently introduced by Senator Murray, we can ensure that these opportunities continue and expand. By paying the wages while students work in these jobs, we open doors that would otherwise be closed to them.

Another way we can open doors for workers of all ages is through on-the-job training. On-the-job training, or OJT, allows an employer to hire someone and then receive support for a portion of that employee's wages and /or the cost of his or her training. OJT can be structured in several ways, and local workforce boards around the country are already operating OJT programs. Especially when streamlined for less burden on the employer, a formal OJT program is an effective tool that helps jobseekers get in the door and get up to speed while getting paid, while offsetting for the employer the expense and risk of training a new hire. It often enables business to create jobs earlier in the business cycle, thereby increasing productivity sooner and jumpstarting more hiring.

Increasing the capacity of our workforce system to deliver OJT will help to jump-start our economy and create jobs—and we firmly believe that the most effective way to implement these investments is through the existing system: the local workforce investment boards.

The local WIBs have proved, most recently through the Recovery Act funding, that we can very quickly and effectively get funding out and working in the community. When it comes to on-the-job training, we can tap into the strong connections we already have with employers, especially through our sector partnerships, which allow us to work across an industry rather than only firm by firm. And we can ensure that OJTs are linked to a plan for employee retention after the training period is over by connecting with all the resources of the one-stop system.

As a local workforce investment board, we can make these connections. We are governed by a business-led board that invests public funds strategically in training for skills that employers need and that are part of a pathway to long-term self-sufficiency. We bring employers together with colleges, K-12 educators, economic development and many other stakeholders to most effectively use our resources in the community.

We know that skill training and job creation go hand in hand. I hope you will agree, as you hear from businesses and individuals and organizations throughout the country, that we must continue to invest in the skills of our workforce; in incentives like on-the-job training that encourage employers to hire; and in work experience that our young people need in order to continue learning and earning throughout their lives.

Thank you again very much for the opportunity to speak today.